

From Argentina to America: An Oral History

What is history? History is the study of the human's past. Now an oral history is the recording, preservation and interpretation of historical information, based on the personal experiences and opinions of the speaker. Oral histories are conducted to get a one-on-one historical lesson from someone who has lived through certain situation, such as obstacles, barriers or just great experiences. I prefer oral histories over text book histories because an oral history can be different from the history that is etched in stone. Someone's oral history could be different from the history of a certain group, in history books it's like the history stands for all people of the certain group but it could be different for certain individuals and that's where the oral history comes in to play. When it was time for me to conduct my oral history, I was going to do my oral history on my good friend Ricardo Carrera. Our friendship began to grow our junior year in high school having all the same classes together and I began to talk to Ricardo more often. I knew that he was an immigrant from Mexico and he lives with his parents and his younger sister, and they were all Mexican-born citizens. Unfortunately, I had to switch my oral history interviewee, because I thought that Ricardo Carrera lived in Mexico when we has younger, but I found out that he was born in Mexico and when he was a few months old his parents moved to the U.S. So, I conducted my oral history on Alejandra Seufferheld. She is an outreach coordinator for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at the U of I. She is a native of Argentina and was born in 1957. Alejandra moved to America in 1987, because her husband started graduate school in Colorado. After his master degree, she went back to Argentina in 1991, for one year. Then she came back in 1992-93 for his PhD. Alejandra has one daughter who is a current student at Parkland in Champaign and has numerous family members who still lives in Argentina. After that she has been in the U.S. I found Alejandra to be a very interesting person, and she was ready to give her story

during the pre-interview, and I had to stop her before she revealed too much important information.

I believe that I had an excellent interview with Alejandra. The interview I was the longest conducted oral history in our entire class. The oral history lasted an hour and thirty minutes. The interview took place on April 26, 2010 in the International Studies Building. I could tell that Alejandra was kind of nervous at first just by her movements and she was rocking back and forth a lot at the beginning, but as the interview got into gear she began to calm down and relax. I started off with a simple question just how was life living in Argentina. After a few minutes listening to the interview I found myself asking two questions at one time, so I had to catch myself on that and ask one question at a time so all the questions can be answer. I found a lot of things interesting by her story, for instance in Argentina lunch is the most important meal of the day, it is the time when all the family get together and enjoy a meal. I consider their lunch to be our dinner in America. Alejandra lived in a middle class family in which her father was in the army and her mother was a stay at home mom whose salary was the main salary entering the household. The schooling system in Argentina is totally different than the schooling system here in America. In Argentina, they only have grammar school and high school; in which grammar school is kindergarten through seventh grade and high school is 1st year in high school through 5th year in high school. Alejandra went to high school for one specific subject which was architecture and she told me that in Argentina you don't change classmates or classes you have the same classmates for years and years, and I told her that that sounds like college here because it seems like they are in high school for a specific subject like we are in college for a specific. I was shocked when Alejandra said that the schooling system in America is stricter than the schooling in Argentina. Alejandra quoted "sometime here (America) its more pressure to be the best but in Argentina there's no pressure to be the best to be the best to

be the best.” There is no ACT or SAT in Argentina either, you have to take a pre-university test to test into the universities in Argentina. Alejandra states that she was an average student in high school and you have to pass the classes in order to take the final exams in high school. Alejandra studied architecture at the University of Mendoza, and I found out that all the public universities are free in Argentina and they are more prestigious than private universities which are another complete opposite from the universities in America. Also the universities in Argentina are five year universities including her final thesis in order to receive her degree. What I found out that was cool was that all of Alejandra’s sibling went to a university and receive degrees in all different fields, which shows me that education is every import in her family. Alejandra is the only one in her family that is in America, all her other siblings still live in Mendoza, Argentina. Alejandra’s original language is Spanish but it was hard for her to learn English, in elementary school she had English every year, but she said when she came here it was totally different. She was afraid to talk to people and she always depended on her husband to translate and depend on his English, but she prefers Italian because the language is close to Spanish.

Next, I began to ask her information on the Dirty War. Now, if you don’t know the Dirty War is a violent time in Argentina were people were rebelling against the government causing many people to lose their lives and hundreds of people coming up missing. The Dirt War lasted for about seven years. At this time Alejandra was in high school and the thing she remembers the most is the insecurity that filled here body. She said that people were afraid for their lives because terrorist would bomb and attack people. It was very common to be at home and hear bombs exploding. The insecurity caused a lot of fear in people. I also mention the people who were coming up disappearing and Alejandra didn’t know anyone personally, but she said that her husband said that during this time people were inspecting his neighborhood looking and searching

for individuals. Later in the 80's she mentions how the economy began to suffer because of the inflation. While in line she said that people would come over the intercom and announce that prices would rise between 10% and 20%. Alejandra met her husband in Argentina and came to America in 1987 and they were already married. Her main reason for coming to America was because her husband went to college at the University of Colorado to receive his masters and PhD and also her mother-in-law was living in Miami. My favorite question of all is when I asked Alejandra has her identity changed since she came to the U.S and does she consider herself more as an Argentine woman or more Americanized, and Alejandra stated "I still consider myself Argentinean." She say she realized that she does look at things different in Argentina like the order or how America is more organized than Argentina. Alejandra didn't have the "normal" American dream. She was only supposed to stay in America for two years and go back to Argentina, but unfortunately things didn't go exactly as planned. While in Argentina, Alejandra didn't have a specific view of how America was, she say the people in Argentina believed that its easier to live in America than in Argentina, but she tells them that it's not easier living in America, it's still hard because you still have bills and there are still struggles. A moment during the interview that I found funny is when Alejandra says that when she first came to America, her and her husband didn't go to the movies or anything they drank Urban Tea, and felt that that was a special night for them included drinking Urban Tea. Alejandra and her husband spent over 17 years living in family housing on campus, because they couldn't afford to stay in an apartment. I found out something new that I didn't know, when I asked Alejandra about the currency in Argentina she told me that their currency is the pesos, and it surprised me a bit, because I thought that pesos were only used in México. The hardest struggle coming to the U.S for Alejandra was the language barrier, she says that it took her about eight years to feel completely comfortable speaking English. Alejandra

attended the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign many years after they moved to America to earn her masters in architecture. Alejandra says that designing buildings and spaces where people live sparked her interest in architecture. She focused her thesis for architecture in affordable housing. The universities in Argentina you have all the same course, you don't choose your course and they are all year long courses and if you pass the classes with good grades you get the chance to take the final exam. The grading systems in the universities are different between Argentina and America. Alejandra didn't pay tuition at the U of I she received a scholarship/grant to help pay for college here. During the interview, we took the time out to see how much it cost to attend the University of Mendoza which is a monthly payment of five or six hundred pesos, which comes out to be 160 U.S dollars a month, which is still cheaper than it is here in America. Alejandra began to reminisce on her friends that she met while in graduate school. While in America Alejandra lived in Colorado for ten years and then remained here in Illinois. When I asked her what state did she like the most and she quoted "I like Colorado, because of the landscape," and she like Illinois because the people are nice. In Argentina she says the people are friendlier when they greet you. There is a lot of distance within the people in America. In Argentina the way to say hello is by a kiss on the cheek or a hug which is more formal to her. Alejandra applied for her job as an outreach coordinator to help people have the opportunity to learn the Latin American culture, tradition, music and history, and bring Latin America to U of I. Alejandra said that she didn't experience any type of racism or discrimination while in America. Alejandra always sends her families M&M's and Skittles, because they don't have them in Argentina. Mrs. Alejandra misses the music, food, language and lifestyle the most since she has been in America. While Alejandra lived in America at a younger age she missed family, friends and especially cooking, and while she was in America she liked getting together with friends. Mrs. Alejandra has a daughter who

currently attends Parkland College in Champaign. Her daughter is completely bilingual knowing both Spanish and English. Education is a big key in Mrs. Alejandra's household. She states that her family keeps Spanish in their house so they won't forget the language. In America, Alejandra celebrates most American cultures just as she did in Argentina, the difference is that in Argentina Christmas is in the summer and she celebrates May 25 which is Argentina's Independence Day. I was told that her daughter was born premature, I believe 3 months early. If Mrs. Alejandra was able to go back in time to change her location, she says that she wouldn't change anything because her daughter was born premature and she is very grateful, because she says that maybe if she was in Argentina her daughter may not have survived. The public hospitals in Argentina are free, but the private clinics are expensive. By not thinking of bad and negative things helped her overcome her struggles in America. While in Colorado, Mrs. Alejandra had one friend who helped her and her husband and they are still close friends now. Alejandra had only had her one sister, brother and two nephews come to America to visit her, the others haven't because it is too expensive for her family to travel here. I asked if she had the option to either stay in America or go to Argentina she said that she would stay here because her daughter is here, but if her daughter left with her she would go back to Argentina because her family is there and because Argentina is her homeland. One important characteristic that has changed since she has been in the U.S is her shyness. She says that she was a lot shyer while she was in Argentina, at first she was afraid to talk but now she's not afraid. The two things that Alejandra missed the most about her life in Argentina is living in San Rafael, in the summer which was from December to March, and January is like a July here, and her family will come together and she would play with her cousins and they would have family reunions. Her life in Mendoza, she misses sleeping with her classmates, playing in the attic with friends, but she said things have changed since she was a child in Argentina. There are a

lot of robberies now in Argentina and things are more insecure now, back when she was a child she says that people were not afraid to walk alone at night, but things have change a tremendous amount in Argentina since she was a child. In America the two most important things were when her daughter was born and how everyone was so nice and always helped her. She told a story about when she was pregnant with her daughter and she had to be flown in a helicopter because her condition wasn't good at the time of her pregnancy and there was no sign of life for her daughter so they had to remove the baby from her stomach. I asked her if she had any regrets about anything and she says no, she hopes the best for both Argentina and America, and she's worried about the violence in Argentina and she is worried about the money struggles in America. Her final remarks were about her family. She talked about the distance between her and her family and how there are a few family issues and she believes that if she was closer to them things would be different with her family. Her dream is for all of her family members get a chance to come to America and just experience the American culture. She feels that it is important that people have the opportunity to be open not closed to new ideas, to go out and see new things, and to get out and adventure. Her message to someone who is currently in the position when she first arrived to America is to be open and meet new people and try to be happy wherever you are, and enjoy what you have instead of missing everything. After the interview ended, Mrs. Alejandra began to talk more about education. It was like she had a personal note for me that she didn't want to share in the oral history. At first, I wanted to turn the recorder back on and pick up the final comments she had, but I noticed that it was more on a personal note. I believe after the recorder was off, we talked for maybe another ten or fifteen minutes. Overall the oral history went well it lasted and hour and thirty minutes and I believe that we could've talked for another 4 hours if we had the chance. Mrs.

Alejandra's main focus was to make sure I had enough information to write my final paper. She was extremely helpful and was willing to help me out with anything.

I focused my interview on getting the best and most efficient information as possible. I didn't want to completely control the interview, I planned on sticking to my questions, but if Alejandra jumped onto a topic that I thought was interesting, I would begin to follow her structure. Topics that I wanted to focus mainly on were her childhood, education, the Dirty War and her struggles in both America and Argentina. By focusing the interview this way it gave both of us the opportunity to ask questions and just go with the flow. During this oral history, I learned a tremendous amount of new material. I learned that the schooling system in Argentina is a complete 180 degree turn from the U.S. while here in America we have grammar school, junior high and high school, in Argentina they only have grammar school which consist of kindergarten through seventh grade and high school which is 1st through 5th year students. Another difference is that in Argentina all public universities are free you, you have to pass the placement exams to enter the university, and the public universities are more prestigious than private universities which is the complete opposite in America. Also the public hospitals are free but the private clinics are expensive in Argentina. The main professions in Argentina are engineering and business. A simple thing that I found out was that the currency for Argentina is the peso, which came to be a complete shock to me. Since there was a lot of immigration in Argentina, I learned that pasta is one of the main dishes eaten in Argentina, mainly because of the different cultures that immigrants brought with them from their countries. I believe this oral history is valuable, because this story could be a similar replica of someone else's life. It could be used to help educate students about the history of Argentina. The most valuable information expressed in this oral history is education. In my opinion based off this oral history someone could learn a lot about the difference in the educational

system in both countries, and if someone was to go to Argentina for college they would know the requirements and what to expect when they get there. Just knowing Mrs. Alejandra's struggles and success is touching and could inspire someone that is now in the same position when she first arrived to America. Conducting this oral history was a great experience. I loved and enjoyed the time spent conducting the oral history and learning new information from the background information and Mrs. Alejandra. By enrolling in this course it has opened my eyes to a new hobby that I would like to continue to pursue in the future.

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